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LATE SPRING IN LAKE VALLEY

By MILTON S. RAY

WITH TWO PHOTOS

DURING the spring of 1909 I spent some few days in the field with Club members Carriger, Pemberton and Heinemann, at various points in the Bay Counties; but it was not until I boarded the overland, at Oakland Pier, on the evening of May 24, with the vision of six weeks in the High Sierras before me, that I felt the important work of the season had begun. The High Sierras, besides possessing the most interesting and varied avifauna in the State, have a certain wildness, due principally to altitude, that is noticeably lacking in the much lower Coast Ranges. Only those who have known the wild beauty of their snowy and precipitous mountains, crystal lakes and roaring torrents can appreciate the peculiar fascination of this wonderful region.

This Sierran enchantment was now upon me, and when, sometime after midnight, the train whirled in among the foothills above Roseville, sleep became out of the question. It was a beautiful night without, and the foothill country, a land of grain fields, orchards, great spreading oaks and picturesque villages, rolled by, dreaming in the moonlight. As the train wound higher the valley oak and digger pine were replaced by the black oak and yellow pine, while these in turn at higher levels gave way to the sugar pine, fir and tamarack. While much of the timber close to the railroad was stunted second-growth, there were neighboring ridges and canyons that showed a wealth of woodland. Higher and higher the train toiled, past Gold Run (3224 feet), Towle (3700 feet), until Blue Canyon at an altitude of 4701 feet was reached.

At this point dawn began to faintly streak the east, and shortly after there was sufficient light to observe the proverbial early bird in search of the early worm. The frequent stops and slow speed of the train gave considerable opportunity for a sort of "moving picture" field work. Every tree and every brook was scanned with interest and even the commonest birds, seen for the first time after a long absence, seemed rather new and strange. Still higher wound the train and soon we were on the Sierran Summit. The snow sheds did not allow much chance for observation; but thru the openings one could see a never ending world of snow, so deep in places that the tops of small saplings were just peeping above it; while an open car window would admit a frigid breeze that almost seemed impossible in California. After one has recently been in the torrid Sacramento Valley, to be in a few hours here where even spring has not appeared seems almost the work of magic; for with a team this ascent is a matter of five days, which the train accomplishes in about as many hours. This altitude (7018 feet), however, could hardly be reached by team as early as the 25th of May on account of the deep snow on the roads.

Winding out and down from the snowy crest of the Sierras, the train reached Truckee (5819 feet), where a branch line was taken to Tahoe City on the lake. The scenery along the famous Truckee River, which the railroad follows to the lake, is well worthy of a long description if the space would allow. To Lake Tahoe itself, however, no pen can ever do justice; for who can truly describe this magnificent body of water, so wonderfully clear, or the great forests and snow-mantled mountains that encircle it?

The day of my arrival was warm and sunny and the steamer made fast time over the placid, sparkling waters. In shady places along the lake shore some snow

still remained; but this was melting fast. Bijou, my destination, was reached at one o'clock in the afternoon, and not long after I selected a spot on high ground as the site of my camp. I was told that there had been a light fall of snow two days previously; but weather conditions did not cause me any worry as I had a storm proof tent of 10 oz. army duck.

After arranging the camp, time did not allow much opportunity, but I could not forego a short ramble around the camp-grounds and up the meadow. Mr. Wilton Young of Bijou took me to a nest of the Sierra Junco (*Junco hyemalis thurberi*) that he had found a few days before; but the nest was deserted and the four eggs it had then held had disappeared. Along the meadow I noticed Brewer Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) nesting in unusually large numbers; but as it had already become dark I postponed investigation until the following day.

The next morning was spent as planned, but as the season's work in the Brewer

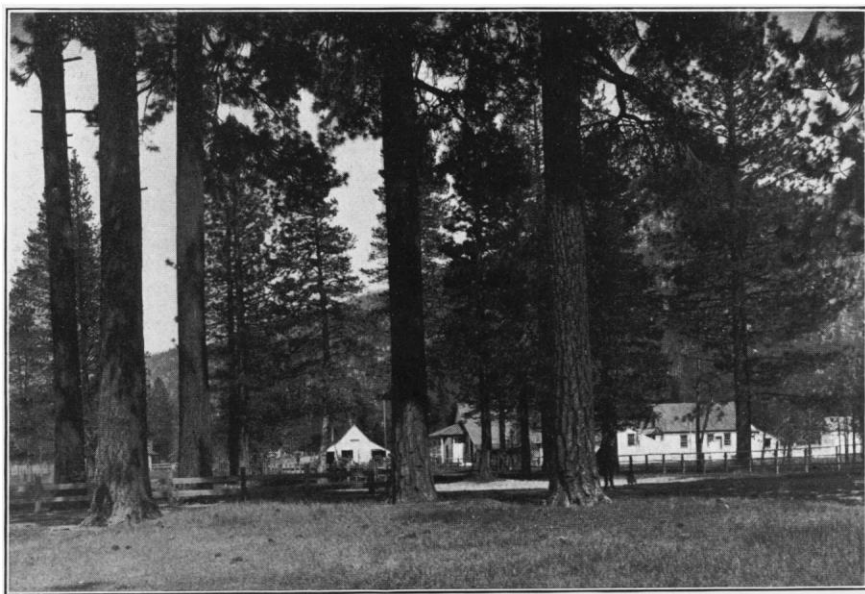


Fig. 41. BENEATH THE PINES OF BIJOU, AT LAKE TAHOE

Photo by Richard Duttke

Blackbird colonies has already been described at length in two articles published in THE CONDOR I shall omit further reference to it. In the afternoon a tramp was taken along the lake shore to Lakeside, but a blinding rainstorm before long forced me to return.

The next morning being clear I decided on a ramble among the higher ranges southeast of Bijou. Here I reached an altitude of about 6750 feet. At this elevation deep snow lay in patches, and the willows and aspens showed but faint buds, while every brook was a turbulent stream of snow-water running bank-full and singing its wild Sierran song. Altho about Bijou (6220 feet) many nests contained even young birds, yet here the birds that were in evidence as nesting were few.

The real find of the day was a nest of the Blue-fronted Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri frontalis*). This bird, while common on the ranges and along the lake shore where the mountains rise from its edge, is scarce in the vicinity of Bijou and all other low

portions of Lake Valley. In the particular spot where I now happened to be, jays were neither to be seen nor heard; but some suspicious looking twigs, protruding from the end of a thick-foliaged pine limb, caught my eye and I determined to investigate. After a rather difficult climb, altho it was but fifteen feet up, I reached what proved to be a nest of the jay. The nest contained three eggs which lay in pretty contrast to the lining of red pine needles. It was not until I had been in the tree fourteen minutes that the jays appeared, and then, altho there were but two, the air seemed full of them; for the jay, when it wills, is about the noisiest bird in the woods.

The nest and eggs were collected, the latter proving well advanced in incubation. The nest, a typical one, is of bleached twigs outwardly, principally of the manzanita, bark strips, grasses, mud, rootlets, and lined with pine needles; it measures seven inches in diameter while the cavity is four inches by two and one-half inches deep. As a nest of this size was rather cumbersome to carry I brought the days' work to a close and started for camp.

Just before reaching Bijou, however, I made a most interesting discovery, the find of the season. In a grove of small tamaracks I came upon a pair of Ruby-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus calendula calendula*) that were putting the finishing touches on one of the daintiest specimens of bird architecture I have ever seen. It was placed but ten feet up and was made of plant fiber, moss and down and warmly lined with feathers and a few horse hairs. The accompanying photo was taken *in situ* by Heinemann on June 19.

The 28th of May dawned windy, cloudy and cold, all of which, however, did not deter me from taking a jaunt due south up the valley. Some distance from Bijou a nest of the Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer collaris*) and one of the White-headed Woodpecker (*Xenopicus albolarvatus*) were noted in inaccessible situations in tall dead pines; while in a tamarack sapling a nest of the Audubon Warbler (*Dendroica auduboni auduboni*) with one fresh egg was found. It grew so intensely cold, however, and sleet continuing to fall hour after hour, that I was finally obliged to take refuge for a time in an unoccupied farm house, where for some hours I past the time gazing out on a chilly and rather dismal landscape or looking over the newspapers with which the walls were papered and which contained the latest accounts of the Russian-Japanese war.

Towards dusk the storm moderating I started back to Bijou. Near camp I noted a rootlet nest of the Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura carolinensis*) with two fresh eggs. It was bilt upon an old nest of either *Euphagus* or *Planesticus*. Altho the Dove is not uncommon in Lake Valley this is the first nest of this species that I have found in the region.

To itemize all the nests found during my stay would make far too lengthy a list, so I will only review the most interesting finds. May 29 was warm and clear and was spent along the range southeast of Bijou up to about 6500 feet elevation. Several nests of the Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*) were noted in pines and firs, all containing eggs well along in incubation. Next came a large nest 20 feet up in a fir. On climbing up the tree imagine my surprise on seeing a Clarke Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*) fly out from one of the branches. My wonderment was short-lived, however, as the nest proved an old one, the bird in the tree being merely a curious coincidence. However, I believe it was a nest of the nutcracker altho careful search failed to reveal any tell-tale feathers or other evidence of the builders. The nest was a large and well-made affair of sticks and twigs, almost the size of a crow's and thickly lined with bark.

Two very common birds among the brush on these mountain sides were the

Thick-billed Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca megarhyncha*) and the Green-tailed Towhee (*Oreospiza chlorura*); but I was not successful in locating any nests of either species.

By daybreak on May 30 I was on the road for the trip to Cave Rock and back. A tramp of 20 miles takes up the best part of a day to say nothing of the stops en route incidental to the study of ornithology. Near Edgewood two nests of the Western Robin were found which will illustrate the wide variation in nesting dates which I have found to prevail in the Sierras as it does almost everywhere,



Fig. 42. NEST, *in situ*, OF THE RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET;
NEAR LAKE TAHOE

Photo by Oluf J. Heinemann

and shows the fallacy of basing any laid-down rule for nesting dates on the finding of a few nests. One of the two nests above referred to contained a single fresh egg while the other held three large young.

Not far from Cave Rock the booming of grouse resounded everywhere thru the woods, but I did not see any of them altho I scanned tree after tree. Cave Rock, a bold, rocky cliff jutting into the lake, was the site of an occupied hawk's nest on my last visit; so it was with a feeling of expectation that I approacht it, but neither the hawks nor their nests were to be seen. In exploring the shallow cave which

gives the rocks their name, however, I came upon a nest of the Canyon Wren (*Catherpes mexicanus punctulatus*?) in a little cleft in the rock near the roof of the cave. Luckily, a rude ladder, bilt by some industrious visitor, enabled me to reach the nest which was made of twigs and moss and lined with plant down, and held five half-grown young. The wrens soon became accustomed to my presence and went back and forth to the nest with food for their ever-hungry brood. This bird has somewhat the manners of the Rock Wren in its way of peering into every nook and crevis and in the remarkable way in which it patters up and down the almost perpendicular walls of rock. These were the first Canyon Wrens I have seen in the lake country; in fact all the wren family are peculiarly rare in the region. Whether these individuals were referable to *conspersus* or *punctulatus* must remain an open question as I felt the rising generation had certain rights in the matter.

Leaving the wrens and their tiny abode in the massive, hollow-sounding cliff, the return to Bijou was made by following the lake shore for the entire distance. Encouraged by previous success in finding nests of the Blue-fronted Jay I spent some further time looking for them. Not far from Cave Rock a nest was notist 7 feet up in a small pine. On account of its low and open situation I took it from a distance to be of the ever-common Western Robin. On approaching I was surprised to flush a Blue-fronted Jay from the nest which held three practically fresh eggs. Identical in construction with my previous nest, yet this, by its lack of concealment was as easy to find as the other was difficult. Two more nests of the jay were found, one 10 feet up in a willow, the other 18 feet up in a fir; but both proved to be of a previous season. Owing to the fact that the birds used bleacht twigs outwardly, all nests have a weather-worn appearance making it hard to distinguish those newly bilt from old ones. A third nest was found on the very extremity of a pine branch 20 feet up. The parents soon came about the nest, but I was unable to reach it or to see from above what it contained. Farther on in a willow swamp tenanted by American Magpies (*Pica pica hunsonia*) a careful search was made but resulted in the finding of but three old nests. This was not far from Bijou and a short walk brought me to camp at dusk.

The last day of May was spent in the vicinity of the camp, a locality that was sometimes as productive of results as some of the longest trips. One week of my allotted six had past, and while it seemed I had traversed a wide area, yet these trips were really but a few trails in an endless wild and it is this vastness of the Sierran woodland that makes even a vacation of six weeks seem all too short. In some future CONDOR will perhaps appear some notes on further field work about Lake Valley and along the higher ranges.